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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 003027

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RED MOSQUE OPERATION

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 2468  
[1](#)B. ISLAMABAD 2270  
[1](#)C. ISLAMABAD 1647  
[1](#)D. ISLAMABAD 897

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. President Musharraf's decision to take military action against the Red Mosque removes a long-festering cell of extremism in Pakistan's capital. Although criticized for being "soft" on extremists, the government's delayed response reflected concern about keeping civilian casualties to a minimum and limiting negative consequences, especially in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Media reports of secret burials to hide the real casualty figures could erode what was widespread public support for action. Religious parties and extremists have responded with so far limited demonstrations and attacks tied to the Mosque action. Al Qaeda's Zawahari has called for jihad against the government, which should stiffen government resolve for further action against extremists.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary continued. The crisis exposed popular discontent with the government's ability to deliver basic services and law and order, even in the capital. The Red Mosque offered what the government often did not provide -- a safe haven for earthquake and rape victims, action to shut down brothels, and dispute resolution that conformed with the conservative (but not extremist) views of many Pakistanis. The militant's ability to hijack the Mosque's populist agenda also demonstrates how talibanization is spreading from the FATA to the NWFP. Musharraf is due to address the nation on the crisis; the question now is how quickly he will move to take further action against creeping talibanization. End Summary.

Entrenched Extremism and a Populist Agenda  
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[1](#)3. (C) The Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) and its associated madrassas have been increasingly extremist since the 1980's when President Zia ul-Haq patronized the mosque and its previous leader Maulana Abdullah to encourage young Pakistanis to join the jihad against the Soviets. Maulana Abdullah's sons, Abdur Rashid Ghazi and Abdul Aziz, continued his firebrand tradition, and throughout the 1990's the mosque openly claimed ties to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. After 9/11, the Red Mosque became increasingly isolated by mainstream religious leaders, religious political parties, and other

madrassas. It also became the natural haven for militants from a host of banned extremist groups, such as Sipah-e-Sabah and Jaish-e-Muhammad. Videos and paraphernalia supporting Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other terrorist organizations were openly available inside the mosque.

14. (C) Concurrently, the Red Mosque was developing a populist agenda by playing to the concerns of working- and lower-class communities who seldom receive adequate government services or effective justice. Neighbors, who had repeatedly petitioned the police to close a known brothel, asked the Red Mosque to intervene. The mosque provided a safe haven for the destitute, including earthquake and rape victims, often ignored by the government. It offered the services of its "Sharia court" as a form of informal alternative dispute resolution to those frustrated by an ineffective justice system. The mosque's literature is highly populist in nature, calling for the rights of the underprivileged, relief for the homeless, rights for prisoners, and universal health care.

15. (C) Since January 2007, the self-styled Red Mosque "brigade" periodically kidnapped brothel owners, policemen, and foreign masseuses. Militants in the guise of students were often seen chanting jihadist slogans outside the mosque, intimidating local CD shop owners, and occupying government property. These provocative and illegal actions occurred every few weeks and were resolved through negotiations with the government. Though it was widely known that the Red Mosque had a cache of heavy weaponry, the brigade had not used lethal force prior to July 3.

16. (C) Pakistani security officials have exercised restraint

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since January due to the presence of women and children in the mosque. This controlled response -- a combination of negotiations and a display of force -- was enough to keep the Red Mosque quiet for a few weeks each time. However, the repeated transgressions of the Red Mosque brigade frustrated both the public and government officials. The June 23 kidnapping of five Chinese massage parlor workers, which occurred on the eve of the Interior Minister's trip to Beijing, appears to have focused plans for action. Violence began when militants inside the mosque fired on policemen who were erecting barbed wire barriers around the mosque to contain further Red Mosque brigade actions.

17. (S/NF) For the operation against the Red Mosque, the government deployed its best-trained special operations forces, including troops with hostage rescue training, in order to minimize casualties. The 30-hour length of the final operation surprised most observers who had not expected the tenacity of the militants and the extent of their weaponry.

18. (C) The government took unprecedented steps (daily briefings, hotlines) to keep the media and public informed during the crisis. However, media reports of secret burials to hide the final casualty figures could quickly undermine government credibility and erode what had been widespread public support for military action. How the government handles Ghazi's funeral will also affect public opinion in the NWFP.

Who was inside the mosque?

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19. (C) Militants: The last holdouts within the mosque included approximately 100 well-trained, well-armed terrorists. The militants were reported to come from various banned terrorist organizations in Kashmir and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), including Sipah-e-Sabah, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Lashkar-e-Jangvi. They were also responsible for bringing weapons inside the Red

Mosque.

¶10. (C) Students: The Red Mosque has two associated madrassas Jamia Hafsa for females and Jamia Faridia (attached to the nearby Faisal Mosque) for males. Most of the approximately 7,000 enrolled students came from conservative families in the NWFP. From media interviews, it was clear that male and female students had been indoctrinated to enlist their participation in the violence. Many of the students -- both male and female -- participated in the violence. The majority of the 3,000 to 5,000 people in the mosque who surrendered were students; most were remanded to their parents' or NGO custody.

¶11. (C) The Destitute: The Red Mosque had also become a safe haven for many widows and orphans from areas affected by Pakistan's October 2005 earthquake. The mosque also supported several rape victims and other women who had been shunned by their families. Many of these victims were released to the custody of NGOs. Initial public sympathy for the Red Mosque resulted partly from its aid to the destitute, but the use of such victims as bargaining chips in the final operation angered the public.

Talibanization

¶12. (C) Internationally, the media has focused on the Red Mosque as the prime example of the Pakistan's talibanization; however, the mosque has had mixed success on the ground. It certainly did not convert relatively liberal Islamabad to its extremist perspective. Even the staunchest Islamist parties, including the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, denounced the mosque's actions and distanced themselves from its leaders. The Deobandi madrassa accreditation board, Wafaqul Madaris, pulled the accreditation of the Red Mosque's associated seminaries in March 2007. Hard-line madrassas participated with the government in negotiations with Mosque leaders during the crisis.

¶13. (C) Most Pakistanis are religiously conservative but

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moderate. While they may sympathize with the Red Mosque leaders' accusations that the government is corrupt and un-Islamic, they oppose violent action. According to Pakistan national television's cell-phone poll (released July 6), 80 percent of the 5,300 respondents supported the government's handling of the situation. Bilqees Edhi, the co-founder of the Edhi Foundation (Pakistan's largest and most-respected NGO) condemned the Red Mosque leaders. She called the behavior of Ghazi and Abdul Aziz "the greatest dishonor of Islam and the country and its history." The main criticism that urban and elite Pakistanis share is that the government waited too long to act.

¶14. (C) In some remote areas of the country and within other radical madrassas, particularly in NWFP and Balochistan, there is sympathy for the militants' willingness to stand up to what they see as corrupt, ineffective local and central government. Since the initiation of military operations on July 3, there have been a number of demonstrations and attacks on NGOs in support of the Red Mosque, primarily by madrassa students in towns across the NWFP and Balochistan. After the operation, religious parties criticized the government's actions, probably to gain political points among conservative Red Mosque sympathizers. The death toll from the military operation will likely be used by extremist groups, such as Tehreek-i Nafaz-i Shariat-i Mohammadi (TNSM), to justify further terrorist attacks in the NWFP. Al Qaeda's Zawahari July 12 issued a video condemning the attack and calling for jihad against Pakistan. The Wafaqul Madaris, which represents 17,000 madrassas, announced nationwide protests.

¶15. (C) Pakistan witnessed vigilante tactics like those in

remote areas well before the Red Mosque brigade became active in January 2007. Pakistan's security forces have not yet been able to enforce law and order in these areas. The presence of jihadi-trained extremists within the Red Mosque also highlights the ease with which such elements can travel from the FATA and Kashmir to Islamabad and other cities.

¶16. (C) Concerned about negative reactions to the Mosque operation, including the death of Maulana Abdur Rashid Ghazi, the government July 11 announced a nation-wide security alert that includes increased police presence in sensitive areas and more security checkpoints. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz announced in a special cabinet session that madrassas country-wide would be investigated to conform with Pakistani laws, especially those banning weapons.

#### Short and Long Term Effects

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¶17. (C) Comment: Most Pakistanis supported President Musharraf's handling of the crisis, although reports of a cover-up over casualties could quickly erode that support. Musharraf's reluctance to act quickly against the Mosque leaders ultimately allowed the militants time to alienate the general public and build support for a military response. At a time when the military was facing increasing criticism, it was able to demonstrate a continued capacity for decisive action. In comparison, the political opposition was ineffective in either criticizing the government or offering solutions, which may marginally help the ruling Pakistan Muslim League party in upcoming parliamentary elections.

¶18. (C) In the longer term, the government faces the specter of creeping talibanization by militants who capitalize on public discontent with the government's inability to deliver basic services and law and order. Musharraf now plans to take action against the spread of talibanization in the NWFP and extremism elsewhere in the country; implementing his plan will require substantial military and economic development resources. End Comment.

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